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A MENACE TO LITERATURE.

BY MARGARET DELAND, AUTHOR OF "JOHN WARD, PREACHER,"
"THE OLD GARDEN AND OTHER VERSES," ETC.

JOURNALISM and Literature stand to each other very much in the relation of the Big Boy and the Little Brother.

Journalism, strong, eager, careless, goes striding along into the rich, mysterious future ; concerning himself with facts rather than ideals, but intent upon great ends, even though hampered by the hundred frivolities and foolishnesses of his impetuous youth. By his side, stumbling and panting, his hand in the rough, good-natured clasp of the Big Brother, is Literature—running to keep up, grasping at a handful of flowers by the roadside, trying to catch a butterfly under his cap ; a little cross now and then, inclined to whimper and pull back, but all the same compelled to keep pace with the hurrying stride of the Big Brother.

Which is all a way of saying that the newspaper strikes the note of human thought, and Literature echoes it; sometimes in voice that is true, and strong, and harsh; sometimes, with equal truth, in melody and beauty.

Journalism speaks the human passion for knowledge; and the man of science gives his wisdom to the world. Journalism says the people must be amused; and the novelist does his best, throwing in a piece of moralizing once in a while—though that is hardly fair, as the Big Brother points out, with no effort to spare the Little Brother's feelings. Journalism declares that the public mind is densely ignorant of Art; and a hundred books come tumbling from the press to teach and to inspire. Journalism utters the vast, patient, human longing for God, and Literature answers as best it may.

As they come, all these thousand books, Journalism does a

double duty; for while with one hand he strikes the note which summons them, with the other he cuffs the Little Brother's ears if they do not please that Public for which he has demanded them. When they do please, he chucks Literature under the chin in a way that makes the Little Brother swell with pride; in both praise and blame he is unjust, though endlessly good natured—after the habit of his kind.

If this were all that Journalism did for Literature—if it gave the brotherly cuffs and snubs, the careful reminders that where a book speaks to a thousand readers, the newspaper speaks to a million, and that, therefore, it were well for Literature to keep his place and be modest; if it gave the occasional earnest blame and discriminating praise, the wholesome neglect of poor work and the consequent impulse to what was better—the Little Brother might well be grateful and adoring, after the manner of his kind.

But, alas, with the friendliest intentions in the world, Journalism, or, to be exact, personal journalism, is doing more to-day to injure the art of Literature than ever hunger and cold and neglect did!

No one will deny that a book, once finished, belongs to the world to which it is given. It is ready for criticism, nay, it invites it; if it is bad, an ideal journalism should show it no mercy; the sooner it is destroyed in the public mind by criticism, the better. But, whether the book be good or bad, the newspaper has no right to the author—so long, at least, as, in the eye of the law, he behaves himself. Yet personal journalism to-day is taking possession of the author: it is putting a subtle poison into his veins; it is misleading him as to the relative values of his work and his personality; it is fostering vanity; in a word, it is exploiting the artist, rather than the art.

One has but to turn to any one of the great dailies to see the methods which journalism pursues in this assault upon the arts—for literature is not the only sufferer. The drama has even more to bear!

The newspaper, as everybody will admit, is the measure of public opinion, and it cannot rise higher than its source; that is the excuse which journalism makes when it is reproached for the miserable and silly personalities (they are rarely more than this, rarely scurrilities) which deface the pages of the great daily

papers. "The public demands it," say the editors, sighing and shaking their heads; "*we can't help it!*" If one protests that one has never yet demanded to know that Mrs. Smith had a dinner party of sixteen, and Miss Jones was engaged to be married, the newspaper has an instant and unanswerable repartée: "Mrs. Smith wishes it to be known that she has had a dinner party. Miss Jones sent us word of her engagement!" If this be true, and there is little doubt that it is, the demands of the public are being gratified at a serious cost; a cost that can be expressed in one word—"self-consciousness."

This is bad enough for all of us, whether we have given a dinner party or whether we are engaged to be married, but in the case of the artist it is worse; for the poison of personal journalism affects not only his character, but his art. Swelling is the usual effect of poisons, and it has been said that with authors this horrible symptom show itself in the head; there is a consequent distortion of values, a shocking loss of perspective, a dreadful intrusion, into the art, of the personality of the artist.

In all seriousness, so grave is this threat to Literature, that it is surely time that authors looked for a moment beyond the pleasant haze of flattery with which personal journalism surrounds them, to see the indignity which is done their art, and the vulgarity which attaches to their characters.

As for the flattery, it is plain enough. A reporter, ordinarily both courteous and clever, calls upon an author and with a pretty word or two about his work begs to know his views upon anything—grave or gay, or lively or severe—it matters not.

"What do you think will be the future of American literature?"

"What is your favorite color?"

"What are you going to have for your Thanksgiving dinner?"

At first sight, the statement that to be asked such questions flatters an author seems absurd; but consider the weakness of the flesh! consider the inherent vanity of us all, nay, even the necessary vanity—the conceit which helps us over the hard fact of our own inadequacy and makes continued effort possible. To have one's opinion asked at all, is flattering, when one comes to think of it; to have it asked in behalf of a million readers is almost intoxicating. It is being lionized on a gigantic scale.

Perhaps that is why we cannot see how absurd we must appear to the observer, who, if he is kindly, will be as sorry for us as we were for Hagenbeck's lions when they went trundling about on bicycles—a sight to make the respecter of the king of beasts turn away his eyes for very shame and pity.

The author, to be sure, knows full well that his opinions upon such subjects as have been quoted are asked only because some book or paper chanced to have brought his name before the public; he knows that the reporter will not ask his respectable and thoughtful neighbor *his* views. He even knows that his opinions, however profound and valuable they may be, would probably not be published if offered anonymously. But there his knowledge seems to end. He is not even able to perceive the utter inanity of such questions; and that inability is, perhaps, the most astonishing feature in the whole amazing and mortifying exhibition. Curiously enough, too, his sense of fitness deserts him, and the modesty which withholds him from shouting at a dinner table, unasked, his preference in colors, or his taste in cookery, does not restrain him from announcing, on the invitation of a reporter, at fifty thousand breakfast tables, that, to his mind, pink is more pleasing than blue, and that he will eat goose instead of turkey on Thanksgiving Day. He has acquired a belief in his own importance which would be pathetic if it were not ridiculous.

That such a belief is injurious to character cannot be doubted; that it is fatal to achievement must be borne in upon the minds of thoughtful persons who follow the work of the victims of personal journalism.

A writer, conscientious and consecrated to his work as he may be, begins, by and by, to see himself in it; little by little he confounds his own personality with his art; on every page, almost in every phrase, appears that distressing smartness, that straining for effect, which is the sad and unmistakable symptom of self-consciousness. If his book is praised, the author imagines that it is he who is praised; from being the servant, reverent and serious, profoundly conscious of the greatness of the art he essays to serve, deeply humble, and deeply joyous in his work, he becomes the master, and shakes his wares in men's faces to attract their attention to himself.

It will be objected that the willingness of authors to lend

themselves to the flattery of personal journalism springs, not at all from vanity, but from the fear of offending the press, and also from simple amiability. As for the fear, it is surely unworthy of comment. But that good-natured authors do not like to say "no" to the reporter or to the entreating letter that begs them to name their favorite flower or their plans for spending the summer, is, of course, true enough. It certainly is not easy or pleasant to say "no" to one's brothers of the press, or, worse, one's sisters, who are harassed and haggard with efforts to get a stickful of matter to fill out a column, and round out a ten-dollar bill. Nevertheless, the candid writer must admit the flattery of the request, no matter what may be his real reason for acceding to it; and he must also be aware that as the newspaper merely announces his favorite flower or his vacation plans, and makes no mention of his amiability, it will not unnaturally be supposed that he has answered these questions for the mere joy of seeing his name in print!

One prefers to take this view, humiliating as it is, rather than that other, held by a good-natured but practical public, namely, that it is a way of advertising ourselves.

"Yes," says the busy man, glancing at a page in a newspaper headed: "*Symposium of Authors, Upon How they Mean to Observe Christmas Day.*" "Yes; they like to keep their names before the public; it gives their books a boom, I suppose. Let's see: *Jane Ann Jones* means to go to church on Christmas Day; well, that's not distinguished; perhaps I'll go myself. *William James Smith*—(why do they all put their middle names in?)—will spend his Christmas with his family. That's not unusual! Well, well, poor things; I suppose it advertises their books. By the way, what did either one of them ever write?"

The requests from newspapers to take part in symposiums differ in variety rather than vulgarity; or, to put it differently, the diversity in these chances for notoriety and free advertising is very great.

One newspaper publishes a composite poem, each line by a different writer; the whole ridiculous conglomeration an insult to poetry and a weariness to the reader. Another wishes to know the circumstances under which, as the reporter may express it, the author "took to writing"; a third proposes to enlighten the public upon the number of servants kept by the

author's wife, and also thinks it would be well to mention whether he wears russet shoes or sober black-leathers. Not long ago one newspaper gave nearly a page to an illustrated discussion of the different kinds of garters worn by certain actresses; and another really valuable periodical so far lost its sense of proportion, as to the importance of a man's work to his private opinions, as to send a list of questions to a number of authors of such a nature as these :

Who is your favorite poet ?

What is your favorite book ?

What is your favorite play ?

What do you enjoy most ?

What do you detest most ?

Now, surely, the intelligent men and women who answered these inquiries—men and women to whom we owe much, whose keen insight into life has touched us a hundred times to laughter and to tears—surely these authors cannot, even in their most fatuous moments, believe that the tired world really cares to know that one most detests “getting the bottom of her dress muddy,” and another most highly prizes “clean gloves?” They answered the questions smartly, or cleverly, or with a courteous gayety and wit worthy of a better cause; and some even answered them seriously, with an evidently conscientious effort to be exact. Which was amusing or pathetic, as one looked at it.

It would not have been courteous, but it could hardly have been less dignified, and it would at least have been true, had each of these amiable persons written across the inquisitive page :

“None of your business!”

It would be interesting to know who reads these banal and worthless opinions; of course, we all read our own, and possibly one another's; and it is whispered that each author buys at least a dozen copies to send to his friends—but who else reads them? It is hinted here and there that the newspapers use “symposiums” as padding, so that they may swell their terrible Sunday editions up to the thirty-two or forty-eight page limit. Cheap padding such symposiums are, in more senses than one; for the authors are rarely paid for their contributions.

One blushes for his craft when looking over such a page; the insult to our art is the first consideration; the pathos of ourselves the second. But it is useless, and it is also unjust, to abuse

the newspapers for either. The matter is in our hands. Journalism cannot be expected to look after our taste or our morals—it is far too busy for either, and too good-naturedly indifferent.

But the Big Brother is really very well disposed to the Little Brother, and is willing to give him what he thinks is a lift now and then. He will tuck him under his arm, head down, very likely, with his little thin legs kicking in the air; the Big Brother is quite regardless of the indignity of such a position; he is giving a lift to a little fellow, which is surely all that can reasonably be expected of him; besides, it seems to entertain the passers-by to see an inverted author—so to speak—and that is all Journalism cares about. But if only Literature could see himself! If only he could realize that the one absolutely fatal thing in this world is to be ridiculous—how quickly he would reject such “lifts”!

But, after all, the remedy is in our own hands: we can refuse to be interviewed; we can refuse to caper whenever a newspaper pipes to us; we can refuse to hide our smirking self-consciousness, our pitiful egotism, under the sacred mantle of Art; we can learn not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.

And surely the time has come for authors to take this stand!

MARGARET DELAND.